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SIPDIS
VILNIUS PASS TO MINSK

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [BO](#) [IT](#)
SUBJECT: LUKASHENA IN ROME, BERLUSCONI PROMISES VISIT TO
MINSK

REF: VATICAN 62

Classified By: J. Liam Wasley, Acting Political Minister Counselor, for
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. Belarus President Aleksandr Lukashenka visited Rome April 27 to meet with Pope Benedict XVI (reftel) and PM Berlusconi. The MFA claimed that Berlusconi had made the decision to break Lukashenka's isolation in the hopes of exploiting potential opportunities for a thaw in EU-Belarus relations created by the suspension of EU measures against the Lukashenka regime and the upcoming Eastern Partnership Summit in Prague to press for political reform in Belarus. The MFA insisted that FM Frattini, who attended the dinner, would raise the question of continuing political oppression and lack of progress on human and civil rights reform and circulated an editorial by Frattini to that effect in advance of the meeting. By all indications, however, neither the PM nor the FM pressed Lukashenka on human rights. Instead, Berlusconi promised to visit Minsk in the fall and encouraged Lukashenka to personally represent Belarus at the Eastern Partnership summit in Prague. End summary.

¶2. (C) During a visit to the Vatican on April 27, the GOB requested a meeting with Italian President Napolitano and PM Berlusconi. Napolitano demurred but PM Berlusconi invited Lukashenka to dine with him and FM Frattini in what was dubbed an "informal dinner". Prior to the dinner, the MFA declined to give details about the proposed agenda for the meeting but insisted that human rights and continuing political oppression would be an important part of the discussion. Lukashenka told the press afterward, however, that neither Berlusconi nor Frattini pressed him on reforms. Instead, according to Lukashenka, Berlusconi said he would visit Minsk in the fall and encouraged Lukashenka to personally participate in the Eastern Partnership Summit in Prague. The Political Counselor of the Belarus Embassy confirmed that Berlusconi accepted Lukashenka's invitation to Belarus and the PM hoped Lukashenka would represent Belarus in Prague. He added that Frattini asked generally about political reforms, to which Lukashenka noted that he was making great progress on liberalizing the political and social conditions in Belarus.

¶3. (C) The GOI had hoped to downplay the visit, but an attentive press, an inquisitive Rome-based diplomatic corps, and a talkative Belarussian President kept the issue alive all week. At the same time the Italian press noted that Berlusconi had unilaterally broken the US-EU isolation of "Europe's last dictator", Lukashenka was praising Berlusconi for his strong leadership and announcing Berlusconi's pledge to visit Minsk in the fall. The GOI reacted chaotically. The MFA rebuffed a request from the Czech Embassy, acting in its capacity as EU President, for an briefing to EU embassies in Rome and instead circulated an editorial by FM Frattini

claiming that he would press Lukashenka on human rights issues (informal translation emailed to EUR/WE). The Director of the MFA's Russian and Eastern European Department told embassies that neither she nor the Director General for Europe (A/S equivalent) had or would get a readout of the dinner and directed inquiries to the PM's diplomatic advisors. The PM's deputy diplomatic advisor told poloff confidentially that Berlusconi had acted on bad advice in agreeing to the meeting but did so out of humanitarian concern over the status of approximately 30 pending adoptions of Belarussian children by Italian families.

14. (C) Comment. Berlusconi's decision to help Lukashenka break his isolation was made without consultation with either the MFA or the EU. While the MFA tried to spin the meeting as a positive development in the quest to ease political oppression in Belarus, Lukashenka came away with the impression that his behavior is no longer a concern for the EU. For his part, Berlusconi reinforced that he prefers to avoid friction in his relationships with foreign leaders even if it requires him to overlook troubling truths.

DIBBLE

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